

Protecting Yourself from Telemarketing Fraud

It can be hard to resist.

- *A telephone call from a charity seeking desperately needed funds for flood victims, endangered species or the homeless.*
- *A postcard claiming you've won an amazing sweepstakes prize if you call and send an "administrative fee."*
- *Or an investment offer giving you an "exclusive" chance to potentially earn enormous profits.*

However you must resist. These are just a few examples of the kinds of fraudulent schemes Americans encounter every day. Experts estimate that consumers lose more than \$100 billion annually to a broad assortment of frauds, cons and scams. Fraudulent telemarketing and direct mail appeals account for \$40 billion of this total.

Alarmingly, the elderly are a major target for con artists, especially fundraisers and hucksters hawking bogus investments and insurance schemes. Whether they are widowed and lonely, eager to help others or merely intrigued by a "once in a lifetime" opportunity, increasing

numbers of older Americans are falling for sophisticated and slick appeals that can wind up costing them thousands of dollars, not to mention untold anguish and stress.

Taking your money is a number-one goal of the nation's scamming scoundrels. Many devise their cons just to get a credit card number so they can go on a spending spree financed by Y-O-U. Others will bill you incredible sums for merely calling them to find out more. And still more want a check or cash as soon as possible – by overnight delivery, by wire or even by courier – so they have their money before you have them figured out.

What consumer-soaking schemes are all the rage these days?

Among the major scams of the 1990s were postcard sweepstakes offers. In one poll, 30 percent of Americans said they responded to such mailings, sometimes sending hundreds of dollars to "register" for a seemingly fabulous prize or trip.

False charities are another popular consumer con. Telephone troublemakers claiming to represent

everyone from police officers to the disabled take advantage of Americans' generosity to the tune of billions of dollars each year. Adding to the problem is an array of fraudulent appeals – in newspaper ads, on TV and by mail – about business and investment opportunities, vacation homes, and even “miracle cures” for everything from baldness to cancer.

What You Can Do

In the face of this onslaught of fraud, the best course for consumers is to beware. Here are pointers to remember so you won't be conned by the pros:

- If a caller asks for your credit card, bank account or Social Security number to verify a free vacation, a prize, or a gift, say “no” and hang up.
- If you're calling a 900 number in response to an advertisement or something you received in the mail, make sure you know all the charges up front.
- Before you agree to support a charity that calls seeking money, ask for written information about its finances and programs.

If you feel you've been conned, call your local law enforcement agency. Additionally, consider filing complaints with the following:

Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs

(800)-552-9963, or

www.vdacs.virginia.gov/consumers/index.html

Better Business Bureau Elder Fraud Hotline

(804)-780-2222, or

www.bbb.org

National Fraud Information Center

(800)-876-7060, or

www.fraud.org

Remember, consumer fraud is a crime. And, last but not least, remember that ***an offer that sounds too good to be true, probably is.***

Consumer Beware

The following are possible signs of a fraudulent appeal for your hard-earned dollars:

- High-pressure tactics aimed at forcing a quick decision.
- Demands for “cash only” or special delivery/pick-up of your payment.

- Companies and charities with “copycat” names – e.g., Salvation League instead of Salvation Army.
- Delayed delivery of a product or a prize.
- No-risk, high-yield investments.

If you are suspicious, ask the company or charity to send written information before you make any commitments. Feel free to hang up if you don't feel comfortable.

Remember, it's your choice!

